

Urban Parks: An Abandoned Priority – The Case of Civic Centre Gardens in Gweru City, Zimbabwe

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ABSTRACT The Civic Centre Gardens in Gweru City in Zimbabwe, which used to be an attractive sanctuary, have become an eye-sore. The gardens have lost their aesthetic and therapeutic values due to a number of factors which include general neglect. Most of the infrastructure in the park is run down and needs to be revamped. The deterioration is largely blamed on the economic challenges that were experienced in Zimbabwe between 1999 and 2009. The study used interviews and observations to gather data. The study recommends that the responsible authority pays urgent attention to the gardens as they are an important component in the landscape of the City of Gweru. The residents of the city should be made aware of the value and importance of the park since it has positive impacts on their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Urban parks are important visual elements in the townscape (Gowda et al. 2008). They are a type of urban open space, which are traditionally identified by their horticultural design, recreational value and open access to the public. A park can be defined as an enclosure in a town with ornamentally laid out gardens and walkways for public recreation (Gowda et al. 2008). The concept of urban parks is probably as old as cities themselves (Gordon and Shirley 2002). The urban parks came into being in the mid-19th century in the United Kingdom as a response to the intolerable living conditions of the Victorian industrial cities (Tzoulas and James 2004).

Urban parks have important functions. According to Fredric Olmstead credited as the “father of urban parks,” parks are places where city residents may experience the beauty of nature, breathe fresh air, and have receptive recreation in the form of music and art appreciation, as well as have exertive activities such as sports and games such as chess (Cohen et al. 2007).

Parks have ecological, recreational and aesthetic roles in a city. They are traditionally viewed as major contributors to the physical and aesthetic quality of urban neighbourhoods (Gordon and Shirley 2002; Walker 2004). Many people may get pleasure from a well-built park without going into it. They may simply appreciate its

beauty as they pass by it on their way to and from workplaces, schools, or shopping areas. Those who live very close to the park have a privileged opportunity of enjoying the park view from the windows of their houses.

Parks are also established so as to provide for fresh air, greenery, contact with nature and a framework for people from all parts of society to mix and socialise. They provide opportunities for people to engage in sedentary behaviour as they sit and relax while enjoying nature (Cohen et al. 2007). Parks are renowned for improving the environmental quality of urban areas (Edwards and Tsouros 2006). They contribute towards air and water purification, while at the same time they are important in wind and noise filtering, and microclimate stabilisation (Chiesura 2004; De Souza 2003). The urban green, which includes garden parks, also helps to reduce urban temperatures (Dubbeling et al. 2009). Urbanites are therefore inclined to appreciate this moderation in local temperatures park and may visit parks just to enjoy the coolness. Parks, by their very nature attract a high concentration of birds and other wildlife in their vicinity. They, therefore, compensate for the lack of natural habitat in the urban environments and, in a way, contribute to the conservation of the biodiversity (Cornelis and Hermy 2004; Goddard et al. 2009). Naturalists find comfort in such environments. As Jim (2004) postulates, cities with high

quality and generous green spaces in the form of urban parks and gardens, epitomise good planning and management. Such cities provide a healthy environment for humans whilst at the same time bestowing pride on its citizenry and government.

It is also apparent that urban parks provide social and psychological services to the urban residents. A visit to the park may reduce stress (De Souza 2003; Hansmann et al. 2007). A park experience may enhance contemplativeness, rejuvenate the city dweller and provide tranquility and a sense of peacefulness (Hami et al. 2011). They offer more than the visual enhancement of scenery. They offer psychological benefits, therapeutic and spiritual qualities (Krenichyn 2006). Studies reveal that the mere presence of greenery in the form of trees, grass and flowers, is powerful enough to confer psychological benefits (Krenichyn 2006). It is argued that the town dweller who has access to a garden immediately outside his or her doorstep seem to have greater opportunities to recover from stress than those who lack the greenery (Grahn and Stigsdotter 2003). Nature is credited with having restorative qualities to humans. Daily visits outdoors help the body to better endure physical and psychological strains such as stress (De Souza 2003; Pate 1996; Hansmann et al. 2007). Spending time in the park can stimulate all the senses and this can decrease the amount of stress hormones (Lundberg 2001). It is further propounded that the aesthetic values exuded by parks have positive effect in dealing with stress in humans (Dilani 2001).

Current trends show that urban parks are either disappearing (Barbosa et al. 2007) or are rapidly becoming areas of neglect within the city, and are therefore increasingly being avoided by the general public (Chiesura 2004). Madge (1997) contends that some local councils see parks as anachronistic leftovers of the colonial era and therefore look at them with disdain. Local councils, who are responsible for managing these places, are either unwilling or unable to commit adequate resources to do so, while the antisocial vandalise, deface and abuse these often fading relicts of a gentler age (Gordon and Shirley 2002). In Britain the neglect of parks started in the early 1990s when spending on parks fell from 54% of the total budget in 1981-2 to 44% in 1991-2 (Madge 1997). This resulted in deterioration of parks owing to a decrease in the number of war-

dens, poor lighting and pollution. As parks are neglected, they are perceived as dangerous places and this reduces the number of people visiting them and this exacerbates their problems (Madge 1997). According to Hilborn (2009), crime and public disorder such as vandalism, littering, dog fouling, alcohol and drug abuse, and public sex have become the dominant activities in the urban parks in the United States. As a result such parks become under-used as they are seen as undesirable and threatening places. Budgetary constraints have forced the neglect of many parks, especially the smaller neighbourhood parks in residential areas. Harare Gardens located in the city of Harare in Zimbabwe, is an example of a park which has not been well maintained during the late 1990s through to 2010 because of limited financial resources and as a result it has become a haven for muggers, prostitutes, vagrants and street kids (Mbiriymveka 2010).

This study was motivated by the apparently deplorable state of the Civic Centre Gardens in the City of Gweru, which appear to be in a state of disrepair. The gardens used to be a marvel that provided a serene and attractive environment before the onset of Zimbabwe's economic meltdown in 1998. A casual observation reveals that the lawn is unkempt and only a few sections have green lawn. The bushes have gone untrimmed for prolonged periods. Most of the flower beds have disappeared and numerous emerging footpaths zigzag across the once beautiful lawns. The perimeter fence is vandalised and broken in several places and illegal entry points have been opened up. The park is poorly maintained and has become a repulsive eyesore. The study sought to establish the reasons behind these developments and suggest some corrective measures that could restore the sparkle that once characterised the Civic Centre Gardens.

DATA COLLECTION AND STUDY AREA

Study Area

The study was conducted at the urban park popularly known as Civic Centre Gardens in the city of Gweru. The park derives its name from the civic centre, which is where it is located. The discussion shall use the word park and Civic Centre Gardens interchangeably in reference to the study area. According to the information

provided by the gardens superintendent, the Civic Centre Gardens were established in the early 1900, and together with the buildings within it covers 4.2 hectares in area. The buildings which comprise of the Town House (municipal offices), the Rates Hall and the Gweru Theatre occupy 1.2 hectares, while the actual park is 3 hectares. The civic centre gardens have been expanded and rearranged over the years. The gardens are composed of dilapidated flower beds, rockeries, lawns, herbaceous plants as well as exotic trees. The dominant trees are the jacaranda, flamboyant, palm, bamboo and pine. The park's perimeter is fenced and has a hedgerow. The park has a total of seven entrances and several paved pathways. There is a fountain-cum-fishpond in the western side of the park.

Data Collection Methods

The study was conducted between September and October in 2010. Data were collected through interviews and observations. Interviews were held with a variety of stakeholders. These included the garden superintendent and two garden attendants, as these are employed to work in the garden park; hence they have first-hand information on the park. They were expected to highlight challenges associated with maintaining the park. Interviews were also conducted with the photographers who usually do their business in the park. Some photographers have operated in the Civic Centre Park for many years. They were therefore vested with valuable information regarding the aesthetic value of the park. Some University and tertiary college students used the park for their studies particularly through the group work method. The study sought to establish the students' perceptions about the park's deterioration. A total of fifteen students were interviewed. Members of the public found relaxing in the park were asked to give their perceptions of the park. Fifteen members were interviewed. Respondents were conveniently sampled and interviews were conducted with those found in the park when the researchers visited the park. In all cases interviews were conducted in Shona, the commonly spoken language spoken in Gweru. Interviewees were naturally more comfortable in Shona than English, hence conversed confidently. Observations were also used to gather data about the park. Ten visits were made to the park to observe activi-

ties that were going on in the park. These activities included the behaviour of the members of the public in the park, as well as the work motions of the municipal workers tending the park.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A number of observations were made during the time of the study. It was realised that teenagers and young adults visited the park, because the park was supposed to be a place for recreation, where they could experience nature as well as socialise with their peers. They also sought tranquillity and pleasure from the park. The park however has lost its ability to provide these functions as most of the sections are a shadow of its former state. Very few sections of the park have green lawn and flower beds although there is no evidence that they are being maintained. As a result the park was gradually losing its reputation as a place for recreation and enjoyment.

Who Are the Users of the Park?

The study team noticed that because of its dilapidated state the park was attracting a peculiar class of users in the form of vagrants. During some of the visits the vagrants were seen lying on the lawn and in some cases sitting on the broken benches. Their presence in part contributed to the reasons why the general public shunned the park. In particular very few elderly people used the park as they said they were concerned about their safety. They were wary about other park users (vagrants) whom they were unfamiliar with. They also revealed that the park no longer had opportunities for passive recreation as facilities such as the water fountain was no longer functional. The fish that used to in the pond had been stolen and the bird aviary had been removed from the park. They also lamented that the beauty which once characterised the park was disappearing, and the greenery was only noticeable in few places. They also bemoaned vandalism and neglect as key aspects that made the park repulsive. They also cited their concerns about young people who came to the park for other iniquitous activities other than recreation. These tended to keep away the elderly who would rather stay at home.

During the time of the study it was seen that there were less female users compared to males. In most cases, the females who were interviewed

felt it was safer to visit the park when in the company of males than being alone. They said they felt unsafe being in the park alone, and were not sure of the intentions of the young males who loitered in the park. Two female users also felt that females avoided coming to the park unaccompanied to avoid being mistaken for prostitutes.

The Purpose of Civic Centre Gardens

Jim and Chen (2006) postulate that urban parks are places for recreation, activity, and enjoyment. Residents visit the park to sit on the green grass and seats as a way of hanging out. These sentiments were echoed by the garden superintendent and two garden attendants who revealed that the Civic Centre Gardens were constructed to provide environmental enjoyment to the residents of the city of Gweru. During the time of study, several people were seen lying on the few patches of lawn while others sat on the metal benches. A number of visitors were observed reading newspapers, books and magazines. Students from Midlands State University, Zimbabwe Open University, colleges and secondary schools were a familiar sight in the park. They revealed that they often use the park to do their studies. They revealed that although the place had deteriorated remarkably they kept on using the park because of benches and the shade provided by the trees. They argued it was no longer the serene and tranquil environment. Students from the Zimbabwe Open University in particular, used the park more often than students from other institutions. This was because since they do not have classrooms at their institution they found this place convenient to conduct their group discussions. This was noticeable during examination periods.

Interviews and observations showed that the park was used for social activities. Gweru photographers used the park to shoot pictures of newlyweds, lovebirds, among many other socialites who want to use the few remaining beautiful flowers and bushes as background to their pictures. Some of the people interviewed in the park said they used the park as a meeting place to talk and interact whilst either sitting or lying on the green grass. During the time of the study a number of people were seen either in pairs or in groups apparently socialising. Obviously

more people could visit the park if it was in a better state.

Some of the people indicated through interviews that they used the Civic Centre Gardens to get away from the hustle and bustle associated with urban life. They said they wanted to escape from the stress and the pollution associated with the city hence they used the park for restorative purposes. After a week of hard work, some people visited the park to recline in the park during the weekend. Some middle aged gentleman professed that after such a visit he felt reinvigorated and ready to face a new week.

Barriers to the Use of the Civic Centre Gardens

Although the Civic Centre gardens are envisioned to play a critical role in the social lives of Gweru residents, they seem to have been repelling visitors intending to visit them in the recent past. Observations made during the course of the study showed that maintenance of the park was done close to the Town House, especially in front of the Rates Hall and the municipal offices. This is probably meant to give a positive impression about the park to the rate payers and civic leaders. In actual fact very little attention is being given to areas further away from the offices. The facilities in the northern part of the park were in a deplorable state. The only toilet available in the park is derelict, with repulsive pungent smell coming out of it. The toilet is located in a secluded area among a thicket of bamboo grass. Some women interviewed expressed that they feared using the toilet during any time of the day. They felt they could either be robbed or sexually harassed by muggers who could advantage of the situation of the toilet.

The rundown appearance of the northern upper part of the park contributed to underuse of the park. This results in a self-fulfilling prophecy that the underuse of parks attracts undesirable people seeking privacy for unacceptable activities (Schroeder and Anderson 1984). During several visits made to the park by the research pair, it was observed that vagrants tended to occupy this area of the park. Some of them visit the park to take a nap, while others hope to find some leftover food from visitors to the park. Juveniles also used this section for iniquitous activities such as sniffing glue, drug peddling and even indulging in sexual activities (which

they most likely practised at night when it was dark) as used condoms were noticed during the study. Members of the public explained that this part of the park was tarnishing the image of the whole park. They argued that some people had actually stopped visiting the park as they felt it was no longer safe. One woman explained that one could not pass through the park at night as one could be mugged.

The children's playground is a remnant of what used to be an attractive place. The equipment was vandalised over the years and no repairs have been done since. The swings hang dangerously, while the slides and the merry-go-round have been reduced to heaps of rusty metal. Children shun the playground for two reasons; firstly, the equipment is broken down, and secondly, the place is frequented by vagrants.

The once vibrant water fountain-cum-fish pond is now a stagnant pool of dirty water. People throw plastics bags and containers into the pond. The water in the pond has not been changed for a long time and it has turned green. In other parts of the park further away from the buildings, the environmental quality had deteriorated. There was a lack of litter bins and litter was strewn all over. Flowers, the hedge and the lawn were wilting, while the flower beds and rockeries were falling apart. On very few occasions used condoms were detected in the northern part of the park. Members of the public interviewed revealed that since the area was not patrolled at night, uncouth people get to dark parts of the park to engage in illicit sexual activities. Numerous footpaths crisscrossing the park have cropped up as users no longer follow the designated foot paths. There are several areas where the lawn has dried out due to lack of watering. The authorities disclosed that the city was experiencing water problems. They argued that it was unethical for them to water the lawn when residential suburbs did not have water. Even though raw water was available they could not use it as they feared park users might drink it.

CONCLUSION

The Gweru Civic Centre Park was in a poor state; hence it was no longer attracting as many people as it should. From the observations made the working class shun the place and students who otherwise use it for education related purposes use it. Mostly unemployed people tend-

ed to frequent the place as a way to kill time. Apparently the responsible authority seems not to be attending to its restoration. The park is slowly growing into oblivion. The vegetation is wilting and the infrastructure in the park is being vandalised. The park has become home to vagrants and this further drives away would be visitors.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Gweru City Council has traditionally taken a confined watchdog role of monitoring the developments in the park. There should be more decentralised thinking concerning the management of the park. The local authority should engage the community on how the public facilities such as the garden park could be improved. One way could be to encourage residents to participate in planting, maintaining and protecting the park as well as other green sites as volunteers who will be providing a community service and therefore should not expect any form of payment from the council. This will give them a sense of ownership and this reduces acts of vandalism of public property.

There is need to educate Gweru residents about the viability and importance of the Civic Centre Park. They must understand the salient benefits derived from the park. The park could be utilised to bestow environmental awareness and literacy on the residents through taking responsible action on the park. The council should move away from dictating how the park operates and involve the public. The council could carry out a qualitative appraisal of the residents' needs and interests on the park. Residents are likely to articulate sentiments that could be utilised as reference points for Gweru City planners in their quest to establish a viable park.

According to the Institute of Leisure and Amenity Management (ILAM) Services (2000) users, potential users and residents should be included in the development of urban parks. Gweru residents should therefore be given an opportunity in the decision making process. They must feel ownership of the park. This inculcates positive attitudes about the park; hence vandalising equipment such as the perimeter fence, slides, swings and benches could be curtailed.

The Civic Centre Park should be revamped so that it meets the residents' needs. The children's playground for example must have safe equipment that meets their needs. The broken down benches must be replaced, while at the same time more benches must be added in the park. Modern and functional toilets must be built in place of the old one that is in existence. The park also needs shelters besides trees that provide the natural shade. Shelters are useful in times of rain.

The park should provide for a wider spectrum of activities. It should host functions such as book fairs, cultural and music expos. There is need to rehabilitate the water fountains, and ponds; and introduce a variety of fish. Birds in aviaries, and reptiles such as tortoises could be added to the park. The presence of small animals and birds is important for sensory stimulation. It is restorative in nature.

There should be better management at the park. The workers should be visible in the park. This gives a more positive impression on the park

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